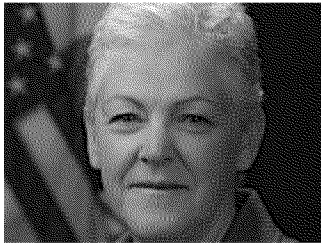


To: Keener, Bill[Keener.Bill@epa.gov]; Zito, Kelly[ZITO.KELLY@EPA.GOV]; Harris-Bishop, Rusty[Harris-Bishop.Rusty@epa.gov]; Allen, HarryL[Allen.HarryL@epa.gov]; Manzanilla, Enrique[Manzanilla.Enrique@epa.gov]; Rao, Kate[Rao.kate@epa.gov]; Calvino, Maria Soledad[Calvino.Maria@epa.gov]; Higuchi, Dean[Higuchi.Dean@epa.gov]; Kao, Jessica[Kao.Jessica@epa.gov]; Blumenfeld, Jared[BLUMENFELD.JARED@EPA.GOV]; Strauss, Alexis[Strauss.Alexis@epa.gov]
Cc: Russo, Rebecca[Russo.Rebecca@epa.gov]; Vela, Austin[Vela.Austin@epa.gov]; Snyder, Raquel[Snyder.Raquel@epa.gov]; Levine, Carolyn[Levine.Carolyn@epa.gov]; Kaiser, Sven-Erik[Kaiser.Sven-Erik@epa.gov]; Gray, David[gray.david@epa.gov]
From: Maier, Brent
Sent: Wed 8/12/2015 3:30:29 PM
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Water Pollution: No Reports of Human Harm From Colorado Mine Spill



By Patrick Ambrosio and Tripp Baltz

Aug. 11— Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Gina McCarthy called the massive release of toxic mining waste into a southwest Colorado river a “tragic and very unfortunate incident,” but said Aug. 11 the agency is “working around the clock” to respond.

So far, there have been no reports of harm to human health from the accident, she said.

“It pains me to no end to see this is happening,” McCarthy said Aug. 11 at an event in Washington, D.C., adding that the EPA is taking responsibility and is aiming to ensure the health and safety of residents near the Animas River, turned orange by the release of 3 million gallons of toxic mining wastewater—three times larger than originally estimated.

Meanwhile, Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper (D), speaking from Durango, Colo., Aug. 11, said the spill triggered by EPA contractors was “in every sense unacceptable.” Hickenlooper visited the area affected by the accidental release that occurred Aug. 5 when EPA contractors used heavy equipment to enter the abandoned Gold King Mine along the upper Cement Creek near Silverton, Colo.

Full Accountability

“We share the anger that something like this could happen,” he said, adding that he expects there will be a full process of accountability for the EPA.

McCarthy, who was planning to travel to the affected region Aug. 12, said the EPA has researchers and scientists are working to address the effects of the spill. She said the agency has a unified command center in Durango and an emergency operations center at EPA headquarters in Washington, D.C., to ensure a “seamless and coordinated response.”

“We want to make sure that we protect people’s health and the resources, but we want to do this right based on the science,” she said, adding it takes time to analyze and review data.

Samples taken from the Animas after the spill indicate the presence of contaminants such as aluminum, arsenic, barium, cadmium, calcium, copper, lead, manganese, selenium and zinc at levels hundreds or even thousands above federal and state limits, the EPA said.

Closed Intakes

Public drinking water systems in the area—including that of Durango, with a population of 17,000—have shut down their intakes from the river. Water systems in Colorado, New Mexico and Utah have been affected.

The Animas flows through Durango into the San Juan River in New Mexico, which then empties into the Colorado River at Lake Powell in Utah. As of 3 p.m. Aug. 11, the plume had reached a point eight miles west of Farmington, N.M., according to a daily EPA news briefing on the incident.

“We are committed to helping people throughout the Four Corners region who rely on these rivers for drinking water, irrigation and water recreation because we really know how important it is to them,” McCarthy said. The agency is providing bottled water to people with private drinking water wells in the area, she said.

‘See Firsthand.’

Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.), Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.) and Rep. Ben Ray Lujan (D-N.M.) issued a joint statement Aug. 11 saying it was critical for McCarthy to see firsthand the effects of the spill.

At the news briefing, David Gray, from the office of external affairs for EPA's Region 6 office in Dallas, said the water quality in Durango and other parts of San Juan County, Colo., is returning “back to a pre-incident level.” EPA has said it will not consider re-opening closed areas of the Animas until Aug. 17.

“Downstream users are being addressed through Regions 6 and 9 of EPA,” he said. “We are assessing conditions as the plume merges with the San Juan River and becomes more dispersed as it goes downstream.”

EPA workers at the mine site, at a high-altitude area marked by historic mining activity, were entering the abandoned mine with the goal of pumping and treating the wastewater, McCarthy said.

Owner Statement

The owner of the Gold King Mine, San Juan Corp. of Golden, Colo., issued a statement Aug. 7 saying it has never mined the property or contributed to “existing environmental conditions” there.

The company believes that much of the contaminated water at the mine originated from another mining source and migrated to the Gold King Mine, said Nancy Agro, an attorney in Durango who provided the company's statement to Bloomberg BNA.

The company “has worked cooperatively with the EPA to create a viable long-term solution to the problem that has existed since 2003 and will continue to work with the EPA to secure land for additional water treatment retention ponds to address the containment and treatment of mine water,” Agro said.

McCarthy said she expects there will be lawsuits over the spill. “Right now my focus is to make sure that we address the spill that is happening,” she said. “We certainly will be available and we will be working through these legal issues.”

To contact the reporters on this story: Patrick Ambrosio at pambrosio@bna.com and Tripp Baltz in Denver at abaltz@bna.com

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Larry Pearl at lpearl@bna.com

For More Information

The EPA's website for the emergency response to the release at Gold King Mine is available at <http://www2.epa.gov/goldkingmine>.

Brent Maier

Congressional Liaison

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region IX

75 Hawthorne St. (OPA-3)

San Francisco, CA 94105

Ph: 415.947.4256